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ABSTRACT

Teachers of communication are aware that communication contains both content and relationship dimensions, or style and substance, which deliver attitudes and ideas to an audience. The key in transmission of meaning is how the sender selects each word or delivery device to trigger the desired response in the receiver. How style influences substance is important, and it includes: (1) listener ability to receive the message; (2) rate of speech; (3) adherence to rules of English; (4) clarity of language and selection of precise and accurate words; (5) eloquence and use of language devices; (6) precision of language style and appropriateness to audience; (7) sincerity; and (8) appearance and nonverbal communication. Style influences content, and must be thought of as a tool to convey content in public address. Contains 13 references. (EF)

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by Virginia L. Chapman

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Style versus Substance in Public Debate: Smoke and Mirrors?

By

Virginia L. Chapman, Ph.D.

"It's not what you said, but how you said it that matters. " This statement may be familiar to those of you who claim to have once been a teenager or a parent of a teenager. Those of us engaged in teaching Communication are aware that communication contains both a content and relationship dimension that delivers attitudes and ideas to an audience.-- in other words, style and substance . The communication models that inevitably appear in the first or second chapter of introductory texts spend a lot of time explaining the relationship between sender-receiver and feedback. The message must be encoded, sent through an appropriate channel, decoded and responded too. In the middle of all this action is the potential for interference or noise. The noise may be internal or external. The noise may be a matter of interpretation of the words selected, an attitude toward the words or the way that the message was delivered. The critical selection of words by the sender may affect the decoding of the message. The channel through which the message is sent may alter the meaning. In other words, meaning ultimately resides in the person/decoder and not in the language or the delivery. The key becomes how the sender selects each word or delivery device to trigger the desired response in the receiver/decoder. Liska and Cronkhite explain that:

sides rather than on the basis of the evidence. It is very difficult to avoid being a prisoner of language. (p.261)

How many times in the press have we heard the use of the word "rhetoric" to signify meaningless words? All too often we refer to shallow arguments delivered eloquently as " mere rhetoric". Does an eloquent style guarantee that the speaker is lulling the audience into accepting ideas that would ordinarily not be persuasive? Does the lack of eloquence leave even the best ideas unheard? Are we truly prisoners of language? Is language style the smoke and mirrors of public argument?

Style is not an unfamiliar topic in the area of communication. Aristotle discusses style in Book 3 of the Rhetoric. According to Cooper's translation, style is *lexis* or the things that have to do with expression--- choice of words, syntax and delivery. Aristotle justifies the discussion of presentation style in that, " since it is not enough to know what to say---one must also know how to say it." (Cooper, Book 3.1) Aristotle goes on to explain in Book 3.1 (1404a) that the "whole affair of Rhetoric is the impression [to be made upon the audience]; and hence delivery must be cared for, not on grounds of justice, but as something we are bound to do." Aristotle believed that, by necessity, speaking before an audience required the speaker to engage in methods of style. Simply presenting facts as persuasion was not enough. The speaker who simply presented facts and arguments without proper attention to style would not be as effective as the speaker who engaged the audience with stylistic elements. He likened the delivery of a speech as having the potential for the same effect as the art of acting has on drama. He spent considerable time in Book 3 explaining the need for clarity, appropriate language choices, and figures of speech. Clearly, Aristotle believed that style affected substance.

Just how style influences substance is important to the communicator. In order to communicate, the message must first be understood. The ideas must be comprehensible to the listener. At the primary level of communication, the listener must be able to receive the message in order to decode the message. The rate of speech is critical to comprehension. Delivering the speech too slowly or too rapidly interferes with the listener's ability to concentrate and comprehend. Additionally, the arguer must follow the rules of the English usage. The most logical argument can still be misunderstood or go unrecognized if the language is not understandable to the listener. An audience must be addressed in a language style that they recognize and understand, but yet creates an impact on the audience.

Clarity in language is a dimension of style.. Avoiding complexity and jargon are important for clarity. Focusing the language to the audience and the occasion are critical. The more formal the occasion, the more formal the language may be. The demography of the audience also dictates the complexity of the language the speaker may select. More educated audiences may tolerate more complexity in language. Jargon that is not shared by the audience is useless as a speaking device. It only serves the function to leave out those who do not share the "inside" language. For example, when a debater tells a lay judge she is going to give "off-case" arguments, she leaves the lay judge "outside" the language. Coaches and students may talk about debate using the shorthand language understood between themselves, but expecting it to translate meaningfully to a lay audience is a mistake in judgment.

In addition to proper language, selecting words to convey meaning precisely and accurately is important. Franklin Roosevelt understood the impact of clarity and

preciseness of language when he penciled in the word "infamy" to replace "history" in that famous line..."December 7, 1941, a day that will live in infamy..." His contemporary Winston Churchill also had an excellent understanding of the need for precise, clear language as a persuasive tool. His selection of the phrase "iron curtain" to describe the effect of the division of Europe after WWII very neatly created a persuasive effect and a lasting picture in the minds of the audience.

Precise language is memorable and creates an impact on the listener. It allows less interpretation between the listener and speaker because the speaker has sent the listener a message that is limited in its decoding potential. An example of the need for precision in language in debate is the use of "tag lines" or "signposts" to identify each argument. Debating before an audience requires students to consider the selection of "tag lines" to help the audience grasp the gist of the argument immediately. The lines must not only introduce the idea, but the idea must be introduced in an efficient and effective manner to help the audience recall and understand the argument being posed.

Although precision is critical, eloquence or the use of language devices to paint a picture in the minds of the audience is also important to effective style. Peggy Noonan, speechwriter for Reagan and Bush, has a keen sense of language precision. Her phrase, "a thousand points of light" to describe the effect across the United States of individuals as volunteers leaves the audience with a mental image that conveys the precise meaning and moves the audience to understand the relationship of the idea to the image. Eloquence includes using imagery and figures of speech to convey meaning instantly to an audience and move the audience emotionally by calling up sensory experience.

Eloquence conveys meaning in a precise way, but it also helps the audience recall the information through the perceptual screen that the speaker desired.

Jonathon Edwards, a famous preacher in early 1700, was a master at providing images that invoked emotion and sensory experience. He painted a picture of a relationship with God that frightened many of his congregation into reconciliation with their Maker. Edwards told them:

> *The God that holds you over the pit of hell much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath toward you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear you in his sight; you are ten thousand times as abominable in his eyes as the most hateful and venomous serpent is in ours.* (Oliver, p.34)

Although I am sure that Edwards' congregation did not find the language choices pleasant, they did surely find that language impacted their thinking and the ideas became part of their thinking. Edwards' language directed the audience to view the situation a specific way.

The precision of language style is critical to conveying the message to an audience in a manner that wins their acceptance of the content and the credibility of the speaker. Unfortunately, the lessons learned regarding proper language choices can be very painful. Against the advice of learned speechwriters, Ross Perot spoke to the NAACP Convention on July,1992, consistently referring to Blacks as "your people". Although I was not in attendance, I did watch the speech on C-SPAN. (July 11, 1992) Needless to say, the audience was less than polite, and by the end of the speech Perot's political advisors and speechwriters had resigned. Perot's message was lost in the unfortunate language choices he made. The audience learned more about Perot than he intended. The language choices we make are a direct reflection of our thoughts. Noonan

explains that memorable "lines" are compactly expressed ideas or thoughts. (p.96) Style is the ability to form the content into language that precisely, clearly and sincerely expresses a thought. An audience may not recall all that was said in a speech, but a succinct "line" may characterize the speech. The time limits in debate beg the debaters to be precise and efficient in recalling the opposite team's arguments for the audience. The use of a succinct line that expresses the idea of the case becomes a tactic that uses time efficiently yet represents the issues fairly.

Rybacki and Rybacki caution that, "You do not want to become so caught up in creating images that you lose sight of what you were trying to achieve through reasoning." (p.218) It is important that the style informs the audience and helps them recall the intent of the argument regardless of whether the audience can recall the exact analysis. Style is the helpmate of argument. Robert Weiss in his book *Public Argument* explains that,

> *The primary aim of stylistic choice is to enhance communication, the way the symbols are understood. Whenever we change our wording, we change the argument to a degree. Therefore, the wording we employ will always affect the meaning of the argumentation in a debate. We always try to choose the wording which will best create an understanding between our listeners and ourselves.* (p149)

The Presidential debates of 1984 between Mondale and Reagan are evidence of style affecting the argument. Roger Ailes' carefully prepared lines for Reagan to respond to the anticipated "age question" were effective. When asked about the concern over his age, Reagan said, "I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience." (Ailes) The public perceived Reagan as having "won" the argument and it became a dead issue for the Democrats. The argument Reagan presented was humorous, but clearly showed

that there are two ways of looking at age—maturity or youthful inexperience. As Weiss says, the wording affects the meaning of an argument. It was a memorable line that left an impact.

Sincerity is an important element of style. The ideas and the delivery of the ideas must come from a sincere belief in a thought or opinion in order to be moving to an audience. Dan Quayle learned the lesson that sincerity can drive an argument. In the 1988 Vice Presidential debates after comparing himself to Jack Kennedy, his opponent Lloyd Bentsen responded extemporaneously using short, precise, direct statements to destroy the comparison:

I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you are no Jack Kennedy.

Bentsen's remarks were suited to the moment and were delivered in a clipped yet rhythmic manner that gave the remarks staying power in the minds of the listeners.

More recently, the style President Clinton used in his statements about the Lewinsky affair was the subject of much discussion. Was the emotional tone a sincere style of delivery in his remarks or was it a smoke screen for the true feelings he held? The angry tone and the finger pointing in the denial became the subject of controversy especially after the apology in which he used the choking voice. The media questioned whether he was trying to use style as a substitute for truthful argument or a shallow adornment to "sell" an argument. Dee Dee Myers, who had been his press secretary, expressed personal disappointment in his August, 1998 apology. She said,

When he admitted that he had misled people, even his wife, his voice caught. For the first time, I felt his pain rather than his anger, and I fought the lump in my throat. I wanted more. But it didn't come. (*Time*, p.40)

There is no substitute for sincerity. Debaters forced to debate both sides of a controversial issue can make impassioned pleas and be extremely convincing, but may argue on the opposite side of the issue the very next round. It seems that many debaters who cannot take refuge in a strong agreement with the side of the argument they are supporting may, instead, take refuge in the sincerity of the evidence or the logic advanced. Although sincerity may be more effective, all too often we shift to a "public argument" style that reduces our sincerity. Deborah Tannen in her book *The Argument Culture* tells us that,

> *It is striking that the same public figures who cultivate an aggressive style in public often turn out to have a very different style in private—and get better results because of it. This is a hint that the aggressive style used so often in public discourse does not serve well as a means of interpersonal communication. (p84)*

A student's demeanor in debate becomes another facet of style in the eyes of the judge. Treating opponents aggressively or rudely reflects an attitude about the argument each is advancing. Cross examination that abruptly cuts off the answer or comments that disparage the character of the opponent reflect the debater's perception of her role as an advocate. Together with the actual argument, these too become stylistic devices.

Perhaps the most obvious communication of style comes from the actual appearance of a person. Nonverbal communication or the appearance of the speaker may enhance or harm the ethos of the speaker. The most obvious and famous example of this is the debate between Kennedy and Nixon. The televised debate showed a pale, sickly looking Nixon in contrast to a recently tanned and healthy John Kennedy. Nixon's selection of a gray suit also hampered his appearance since he seemingly faded into the gray background. Nixon's refusal to wear make-up also contributed to his negative

appearance. After the debate, the radio audience thought Nixon had won and the television audience thought Kennedy had won. The lesson to be learned for debaters is that appearance does count-- if not explicitly, then implicitly. The student who dresses in a professional manner communicates her respect for the event and subtly passes that attitude on to the coach and judge. Although the debater's attire need not be expensive or elegant, there is a level of respect that should be communicated to the audience. In return, the audience will likely bestow credibility on the speakers whose nonverbal appearance impresses them the most.

So, are we prisoners of language? Is style the smoke and mirrors of an argument? We all have some form of style—effective or ineffective. Style influences the audience. A comprehensible delivery which utilizes clear, precise language does not obscure the content or the argument. Quite the contrary, it enhances the argument. Style becomes the smoke and mirrors of public argument when it is used insincerely to bolster a weak or untruthful argument. As the National Educational Debate Association constitution states, "Eloquence invigorates content." Noonan tells us that,

> *It's fine to be moving if you can be and should be, if you're sincere and truly feel that your subject is one that truly lends itself to high sentiment. But before you wage a long twilight struggle to touch the face of God on the city on a hill, keep this in mind: The most moving thing in a speech is always the logic.* (p. 64)

It is always difficult to fake sincerity.

Style versus substance has always been a concern in debate. George Ziegelmueller writing in *Argumentation and Advocacy* (Winter, 1996) tells us that," a concern for over-rapid delivery, too much emphasis on evidence and information processing..." were some of the issues at the First Developmental Conference in 1974 for NDT. Robert Weiss in his well-known article, *The Audience Standard*, tells us that

"Some observers have apparently seen an emphasis on delivery as the solitary unique standard in CEDA." (p. 45) Tom Harte, a former coach and now administrator, writes in the 1998 *Journal of Public Advocacy*,

> *As one who goes on record opposing a debate style which sacrifices sound principles of communication, I was dismayed to discover what apparently has become common practice in debate rounds today. In my first round, for example, the first affirmative not only presented her case in rapid-fire fashion, something I had expected, but her speech had no introduction, no conclusion, and hardly any other of the features of rhetorical discourse. (p. 1)*

As debate coaches and communication scholars, we are concerned about style versus substance. We cringe at the thought of being mere elocutionists emphasizing form over substance, but we know that style influences content in public address. We must think of style as a tool to convey content in public address. In good conscience we cannot ignore the knowledge we have about public communication when we coach debaters. The same ideals we teach in the classroom must prevail on a forensic circuit. Style must be considered in public argument. Style is not the smoke and mirrors of public argument—it is the art in public argument. It's not just what you say—it is how you say it that matters.

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